

Message Text

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ORIGIN EA-12

INFO OCT-01 EUR-12 IO-14 AID-05 ISO-00 SIG-03 MMO-01
CIAE-00 DODE-00 PM-05 H-02 INR-10 L-03 NSAE-00
NSC-05 PA-02 SP-02 SS-15 ICA-20 HA-05 FDRE-00
AGRE-00 /117 R

DRAFTED BY EA/VLC:JRJOHNSON:JY
APPROVED BY EA:ROAKLEY
EA/P:JCANNON
EA/VLC:FZBROWN

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R 021227Z JUN 78
FM SECSTATE WASHDC
TO AMEMBASSY VIENTIANE
AMEMBASSY BANGKOK
INFO AMEMBASSY PARIS
AMEMBASSY CANBERRA
AMCONSUL HONG KONG
AMEMBASSY KUALA LUMPUR
AMEMBASSY JAKARTA
AMEMBASSY SINGAPORE
AMEMBASSY MANILA
AMEMBASSY WELLINGTON
AMEMBASSY MOSCOW
USLO PEKING
AMEMBASSY TOKYO
AMEMBASSY COPENHAGEN
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DEPT OF AGRICULTURE

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E.O. 11652: N/A

TAGS:SOPN, EAID, US, LA

SUBJECT: AMERICAN FOOD AID FOR LAOS

DEPARTMENT HAS INFORMED CONGRESS OF EXECUTIVE BRANCH DECISION TO PROVIDE SOME 10,000 TONS OF FOOD IN ASSISTANCE TO LAOS THIS YEAR THROUGH A UN AGENCY. AMERICAN PRESS HAVE ALSO CARRIED STORY. FOLLOWING QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS WERE PROVIDED TO DEPARTMENT SPOKESMAN FOR USE ON "IF ASKED" BASIS. ACTION ADDRESSEES ALSO AUTHORIZED TO USE THIS GUIDANCE ON "IF ASKED" BASIS:

Q: WHAT HAVE THE LAO DONE TO RESOLVE THE QUESTION OF OUR MISSING IN ACTION IN LAOS? CAN WE RECONCILE GIVING THEM FOOD AID WITH THEIR UNRESPONSIVENESS ON THIS ISSUE?

A: WE ARE NOT LINKING FOOD AID TO THE MIA QUESTION. WE BELIEVE THE LAO GOVERNMENT SHOULD PROVIDE MIA INFORMATION AND/OR REMAINS AS A MATTER OF HUMANITARIAN CONCERN. WE HAVE MADE THAT PERFECTLY PLAIN TO THEM ON NUMEROUS OCCASIONS.

INSOFAR AS ANY HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE TO THE LAO PEOPLE IN THIS FOOD CRISIS MIGHT CREATE A SOMEWHAT BETTER ATMOSPHERE IN U.S.-LAO RELATIONS, IT MIGHT DISPOSE THE LAO GOVERNMENT TO MAKE GREATER EFFORTS TO MEET OUR CONCERNS ABOUT OUR MISSING. BUT ANY ATTEMPT TO "LINK" THESE ISSUES DIRECTLY
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WOULD NOT BE IN U.S. INTERESTS. WE DO NOT WANT TO GIVE ANY OF THE INDOCHINA STATES THE FALSE IMPRESSION THAT WE WOULD PAY FOR INFORMATION. PROVIDING SOME FOOD ASSISTANCE TO THE LAO IS, INSTEAD, BASED ON OUR OWN POLICY TO HELP THE MOST NEEDY WITH FOOD ASSISTANCE AND NOT AS A POLITICAL CALCULATION.

SOME 550 AMERICANS ARE LISTED AS UNACCOUNTED FOR IN LAOS-- 235 ARE LISTED AS MISSING AND THE REST ARE PRESUMED DEAD WITH THEIR BODIES NOT RECOVERED. THE LAO GOVERNMENT HAS NOT PROVIDED INFORMATION ON THESE MEN DESPITE OUR REPEATED QUESTIONS TO THEM ON THIS SUBJECT. WE WANT EVEN PARTIAL INFORMATION THEY MIGHT DISCOVER ABOUT THE FATE OF THESE MISSING MEN. THE LAO HAVE ASSURED US THAT THEY ARE LOOKING FOR REMAINS AND INFORMATION ON AMERICAN MIA'S, BUT HAVE ALSO NOTED THE DIFFICULT TERRAIN, THE PASSAGE OF TIME, LACK OF RECORDS, AND THEIR OWN OTHER GOVERNMENTAL PRIORITIES.

Q: WHAT ARE OUR POLITICAL MOTIVES FOR GIVING FOOD ASSISTANCE TO LAOS?

A: FOOD ASSISTANCE TO LAOS CAN ONLY BE JUSTIFIED ON

HUMANITARIAN GROUNDS. THERE IS A SERIOUS FOOD SHORTAGE AND OUTSIDE ASSISTANCE HAS SO FAR PROVED INADEQUATE TO MEET THAT SHORTAGE.

PROVIDING FOOD ASSISTANCE TO LAOS IS CONSISTENT WITH UNITED STATES HUMAN RIGHTS POLICY NOT TO PENALIZE THE MOST NEEDY DESPITE THEIR GOVERNMENTS' POLICIES.

Q: WHY SHOULD WE BE GIVING FOOD ASSISTANCE TO LAOS CONSIDERING ITS HUMAN RIGHTS RECORD?

A: THIS IS EMERGENCY FOOD ASSISTANCE TO HELP PEOPLE IN DANGER OF SEVERE MALNUTRITION, IF NOT STARVATION. THE EXECUTIVE BRANCH AND CONGRESS AGREE THERE SHOULD BE NO UNCLASSIFIED

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"HUMAN RIGHTS" RESTRICTIONS ON TRYING TO PROVIDE FOOD TO THE NEEDIEST. THIS DECISION IS NOT AN ENDORSEMENT OF OR COMMENT UPON THE LPDR'S HUMAN RIGHTS RECORD.

Q: CAN YOU DOCUMENT THE LAO NEED FOR FOOD ASSISTANCE?

A: LAOS IS LISTED BY THE UNDP AND THE IBRD AS ONE OF THE 30 LEAST DEVELOPED COUNTRIES IN THE WORLD. IT HAS ALMOST NO MARGIN FOR ERROR. WHEN CROPS ARE BAD, PEOPLE EAT LESS.

SINCE ONLY A TINY PERCENTAGE (LESS THAN 5 PER CENT) OF THE RICE AREA IS IRRIGATED, PRODUCTION DEPENDS MAINLY UPON WET-SEASON RAINFALL.

A SEVERE DROUGHT AFFECTED LAOS IN 1977, PARTICULARLY SOUTHERN LAOS, WHICH IS THE ONLY AREA OF THE COUNTRY WHICH SOMETIMES PRODUCES RICE SURPLUSES. UN OFFICIALS, OUR EMBASSY IN VIENTIANE AS WELL AS REFUGEE AND OTHER REPORTS HAVE ALL SUBSTANTIATED THE DROUGHT IN LAOS.

WE ARE SATISFIED THAT THE NEED IS REAL.

Q: IS IT APPROPRIATE TO GIVE FOOD ASSISTANCE TO LAOS, THE CLOSE ALLY OF VIETNAM, WHILE VIETNAM AND CAMBODIA ARE FIGHTING AN UNDECLARED WAR?

A: LAOS HAS RELATIONS WITH CAMBODIA AND VIETNAM. BOTH HAVE PROVIDED ASSISTANCE TO LAOS IN THE PAST YEAR. OUR FOOD ASSISTANCE TO LAOS, A NON-COMBATANT, HAS NO RELATION WHATEVER TO THE VIETNAM-CAMBODIA HOSTILITIES. IT IS NON-POLITICAL, HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE.

Q: HOW CAN WE BE SURE THAT PL-480 WOULD GO TO NEEDY PEOPLE AND NOT TO LAO (OR VIETNAMESE) COMMUNIST CADRE, UNCLASSIFIED

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SOLDIERS AND ADMINISTRATORS?

A: WE ARE GIVING FOOD ASSISTANCE THROUGH THE WORLD FOOD PROGRAM, WHICH WITH THE UNDP AND OTHER UN AGENCIES, HAS OFFICES IN VIENTIANE. WE CANNOT GUARANTEE THAT NONE OF OUR RICE WOULD BE DIVERTED TO THE LAO BUREAUCRACY OR TO SOLDIERS. WE JUDGE, HOWEVER, THAT SUCH PEOPLE WOULD BE FED IN ANY CASE, WHETHER OR NOT WE RESPOND TO THE LAO APPEAL WITH A MODEST AMOUNT OF FOOD ASSISTANCE. IT IS THE NEEDY, ORDINARY PEOPLE OF LAOS, AND NOT THE LAO GOVERNMENT BUREAUCRACY, WHO WILL SUFFER IF INTERNATIONAL ASSISTANCE IS NOT FORTHCOMING TO MEET THE CURRENT FOOD SHORTAGE IN LAOS.

Q: IS IT NOT, IN FACT, TRUE THAT THE NEW COMMUNIST GOVERNMENT HAS DONE MUCH TO BRING THIS AGRICULTURAL CRISIS ON ITSELF BY ITS POLICIES?

A: THE NEW GOVERNMENT'S POLICIES ARE PROBABLY A FACTOR. WHATEVER THEIR SYSTEM OF GOVERNMENT, HOWEVER, THE LAO WOULD HAVE BEEN FACED WITH A SERIOUS FOOD DEFICIT THIS YEAR. WE ARE RESPONDING TO BASIC HUMAN NEEDS--A NEAR STARVATION SITUATION--AND CHIPPING IN WITH A NUMBER OF OTHER COUNTRIES TO HELP A VERY NEEDY POPULATION. I WOULD NOTE THAT LAOS HAD TO IMPORT LARGE QUANTITIES OF RICE ALL DURING THE WAR YEARS:

1969	96,000 METRIC TONS (50,000 IN U.S. AID)
1970	103,000 METRIC TONS (63,000 IN U.S. AID)
1971	123,000 METRIC TONS (62,000 IN U.S. AID)
1972	97,000 METRIC TONS (43,000 IN U.S. AID)
1973	106,000 METRIC TONS (52,000 IN U.S. AID)
1974	74,000 METRIC TONS (24,000 IN U.S. AID)

Q: HOW WILL THAILAND AND THE REST OF NON-COMMUNIST SOUTHEAST ASIA VIEW OUR GIVING FOOD ASSISTANCE TO LAOS?

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A: WE HAVE NO REASON TO BELIEVE THAT ANY OF THEM WOULD OPPOSE HUMANITARIAN FOOD ASSISTANCE TO LAOS. ON THE CONTRARY, WE BELIEVE THEY WOULD FAVOR SUCH U.S. ASSISTANCE TO LAOS, AND SOME ARE ALREADY CONTRIBUTING.
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Message Attributes

Automatic Decaptioning: X
Capture Date: 01 jan 1994
Channel Indicators: n/a
Current Classification: UNCLASSIFIED
Concepts: FOOD ASSISTANCE, NEWS MEDIA COMMENTS
Control Number: n/a
Copy: SINGLE
Draft Date: 02 jun 1978
Decaption Date: 01 jan 1960
Decaption Note:
Disposition Action: n/a
Disposition Approved on Date:
Disposition Case Number: n/a
Disposition Comment:
Disposition Date: 01 jan 1960
Disposition Event:
Disposition History: n/a
Disposition Reason:
Disposition Remarks:
Document Number: 1978STATE139681
Document Source: CORE
Document Unique ID: 00
Drafter: JRJOHNSON:JY
Enclosure: n/a
Executive Order: N/A
Errors: N/A
Expiration:
Film Number: D780231-0385
Format: TEL
From: STATE
Handling Restrictions: n/a
Image Path:
ISecure: 1
Legacy Key: link1978/newtext/t197806101/aaaadjfl.tel
Line Count: 223
Litigation Code IDs:
Litigation Codes:
Litigation History:
Locator: TEXT ON-LINE, ON MICROFILM
Message ID: d712777c-c288-dd11-92da-001cc4696bcc
Office: ORIGIN EA
Original Classification: UNCLASSIFIED
Original Handling Restrictions: n/a
Original Previous Classification: n/a
Original Previous Handling Restrictions: n/a
Page Count: 5
Previous Channel Indicators: n/a
Previous Classification: n/a
Previous Handling Restrictions: n/a
Reference: n/a
Retention: 0
Review Action: RELEASED, APPROVED
Review Content Flags:
Review Date: 29 mar 2005
Review Event:
Review Exemptions: n/a
Review Media Identifier:
Review Release Date: N/A
Review Release Event: n/a
Review Transfer Date:
Review Withdrawn Fields: n/a
SAS ID: 2141388
Secure: OPEN
Status: NATIVE
Subject: AMERICAN FOOD AID FOR LAOS DEPARTMENT HAS INFORMED CONGRESS OF EXECUTIVE BRANCH DECISION TO PROVIDE SOME 10,000 TONS OF FOOD IN AS
TAGS: SOPN, EAID, US, LA
To: VIENTIANE BANGKOK
Type: TE
vdkgvkey: odbc://SAS/SAS.dbo.SAS_Docs/d712777c-c288-dd11-92da-001cc4696bcc
Review Markings:
Sheryl P. Walter
Declassified/Released
US Department of State
EO Systematic Review
20 Mar 2014
Markings: Sheryl P. Walter Declassified/Released US Department of State EO Systematic Review 20 Mar 2014